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**Conceptualising consumers' cultural and social self-concept: the mediating effects of national acculturation.
Implications for international branding**

Abstract:

Converging global consumer wealth increases significance of the symbolic elements of brands to the consumers and cultural aspects such as, for example, family, ethnic and education values etc. play a key role in consumers' self-concept and social identity definition. Rapid economic growth in the emerging markets increases the buying power of consumers in these countries, making them of a greater attractiveness to international marketers than ever before. However, important differences in consumer behaviour in these markets have been indicated by international marketing researchers (Steenkamp and Hofstede, 2002; Keller and Moorthi, 2003) and calls are made for the theories and models that were developed in the Western cultural settings to be validated if not extended in the emerging markets (Steenkamp and Burgess, 2002). This research attempts to extend or modify the existing theory of brand image/social identity congruence within a context of consumer acculturation in the emerging markets of Eastern Europe. The proposed research model incorporates the interrelated constructs of consumers' cultural and social self-concept and brand image perceptions projected by consumers. The influence of 'imported' cultures on social, ethnic identification and consumption behaviour through acculturation phenomenon is conceptualised.

Keywords:

Social identity; brand image; acculturation; emerging markets.

Track: International and Cross Cultural issues in Marketing

Introduction

It has been generally accepted by researchers (e.g. Levy, 1959; Belk, 1988; Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998) that brands serve individuals as symbolic reflections of their extended self-image, social status and culture (Belk, 1988). The concept of brand equity and the emotional components of brands have been identified by The Marketing Science Institute as one of the current research priorities. Intense competition across almost every product category increases the importance of intangible brand components, such as brand image and brand personality, as they allow brands to build more emotional relationships with the consumers and therefore enhance customer loyalty.

Recent research indicates the increasing significance of a cultural dimension in developing marketing strategies (Steenkamp and Burgess, 2002; De Mooij, 2004; Schuh, 2007). Culture is defined as a construct “*from which person’s sense of reality, identity and being emerge*” (Penaloza and Gilly, 1999 p.250) which will systematically moderate the ways members of a social/cultural group will behave, think and feel (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). With converging wealth, consumers acquire freedom of self-expression through ability to make buying decisions based on emotional appeals of the products rather than just functional ones, and cultural aspects such as, for example, family, ethnic and education values etc. play a key role in consumers’ self-concept and social identity definition.

From a marketing standpoint, cultural values play a key role in consumers’ defining their social and self-identity whereas brands serve as a means of declaring it. Failure to take cultural divergence into account when developing and communicating branding strategies has been a cause for many brands’ underperformance (Keller and Moorthi, 2003). Significant differences in consumer behaviour and brand perceptions in emerging consumer markets have been highlighted (e.g. Supphellen and Gronhaug, 2003; Roberts et al, 2005; Low and Freeman, 2007). Steenkamp and Burgess (2002) state that consumer behaviour theories and models that were developed in the Western cultural settings require validation in the emerging markets and call for more research on international marketing and consumer behaviour. Indeed, existing consumer behaviour knowledge largely is derived from empirical studies of consumers in Western countries (Essoussi and Merunka, 2007).

This research attempts to extend or modify the existing theory of brand image/social identity congruence within a context of consumer acculturation in the emerging markets of Eastern Europe. The relationship between cultural values and brand image perceptions and potential influence of acculturation on these variables are investigated. Does acculturation mediate cultural values, brand perceptions and ultimately consumption behaviour of different groups of consumers? The existing literature reflects a lack of empirical studies on transformation of local cultures influenced by ‘imported’ cultures and their influence on consumer behaviour (Steenkamp and Hofstede, 2002; Soares et al, 2007; Benet-Martinez et al, 2002). The focus of this paper is to develop a conceptual model of consumers’ view of brand image from a viewpoint of their own social identity, determined by cultural values, through the ‘lens’ of acculturation.

Theoretical Framework

Brand Image and Self-concept Congruity

Seminal branding research (e.g. Keller, 2003; Aaker, 1996; De Chernatony and McDonald, 2003) has produced a number of conceptual models simplifying and organising brand complexity into measurable and manageable constructs. Although beneficial in terms of applying a more structured approach to branding, these models have been regarded by some as inconsistent and confusing (Grace and O’Cass, 2002). Indeed, there is a considerable

amount of variance in terminology applied in describing the concept of branding (e.g. Aaker's (1997) "Brand Personality", Keller's (1998) "Brand Image" and Berry's (2000) "Brand Meaning") and there are discrepancies in conceptualising the brand equity components and their relative importance. For example, although brand image is identified as an integral part of brand equity, the opinion of researchers (e.g. Aaker, 1997; Berry, 2000, Fournier, 1998; Keller, 2003) on its' role and hierarchical significance in comparison to other components varies. Besides, being ultimately aimed at understanding more about the intangible aspects of consumer-brand relationship, the majority of these research attempts have been approached from a marketing management perspective aiming to structure and organise branding strategies development for commercial businesses, with disseminated research of consumer-brand relationships such as Aaker's (1997) Brand Personality and Fournier's (1998) consumer-brand relationship approach. Keller (2003) developed a Customer-Based Brand Equity Model, approaching brand equity from a perspective of consumer response to marketing activities of the brand, or, in other words, attempting to categorise brand knowledge held by the consumers and incorporate some of the existing branding research scales (Fournier, 1998; Aaker, 1997; 1999) to derive a full understanding of this knowledge and how consumers' self-concept is manifested or mirrored by the brands they consume.

Self-concept was defined as a total set of person's self-perceptions and self-evaluations (Grubb and Grathwohl, 1967; Rosenberg, 1989). For consumers, brands serve as material instruments in proclaiming and improving their self-concept, thus enhancing emotional cues and augmenting the personal meaning of the brand to a consumer by providing an opportunity to establish a relationship with a product/service which image and/or perceived social attributes are more consistent with consumers' own self-concept.

Cultural facets of social identity

Reed (2002) extended the self-concept paradigm in consumer behaviour research by applying the psychological theory of social identity to consumer behaviour. The social identification process is described by Reed (2002) as a process of psychological connection with an individual or group. Consumers desire to maintain a positive self-image by identifying themselves with the group they would like to be associated with (Hogg et al, 2000) by sharing values, beliefs, lifestyles etc. and expressing themselves through symbolic benefits offered by brands. Cultural variances become of increasing significance to contemporary marketing research as they play a crucial role in consumers identifying their frames of reference within their society (De Mooij and Hofstede, 2002; Triandis, 1989).

A stream of international marketing and cross-cultural research widely applies Hofstede's (1980, 1991) national cultural framework and Schwartz's values framework (1994, 1997) to define dimensions of cultural variations within the societies. Although not without limitations, these two frameworks have been validated across many countries. Steenkamp (2001) identifies some overlaps between the two frameworks and proposes the following unified national cultural dimensions:

1. Autonomy versus collectivism
2. Egalitarianism versus hierarchy
3. Mastery versus Nurturance
4. Uncertainty avoidance

Although the literature indicates that culture can be conceptualised at a national level given there is a meaningful degree of historical, political, language, social and other similarities (Hofstede, 1991; Schwartz, 1994; Smith et al, 1996), Steenkamp (2001) states that the national level is not the only level consumer culture and behaviour can be operationalised

and Schwartz and Ros (1995) argue that levels of culture should be derived from the research and analysis of motives that cultural groups pursue while justifying their behaviour. While national culture frameworks identify and describe cultural variances from a broader perspective, they ignore differences between individuals and the extent of cultural contamination occurring in different cultural groups. Cultural diversity exists even within cultures, and the intangible aspects such as values, beliefs and artefacts pursued by individuals formulate their in-group and individual self-concept.

The “culti-unit” (Naroll, 1970) is a useful tool to explore values at a contact group cultural level. Culti-unit can be identified and analysed at any cultural level, given the two definition criteria (individuals sharing language and belonging to the same contact group) are met. The cultural systems framework originally developed by Sojka and Tansuhaj (1995) and adapted by Craig and Douglas (2006) classifies cultural systems into three interdependent variables:

1. Intangible elements (values and beliefs)
2. Material aspects (artefacts, symbols and rites)
3. Communication links and systems (language, communications channels used by unit members to interact with each other).

These dimensions provide an insight into the enduring collective self-concept, which is comprised of shared experiences, memories, symbols and values (Smith, 1990) and individual self-concept, which projects consumers’ private values and beliefs system. Consumers group into subcultures that are formed at the point of reference groups consumers identify themselves with and values and beliefs systems pursued by every group define the variance between groups.

Not too eager? Consumers in the emerging markets of Eastern Europe

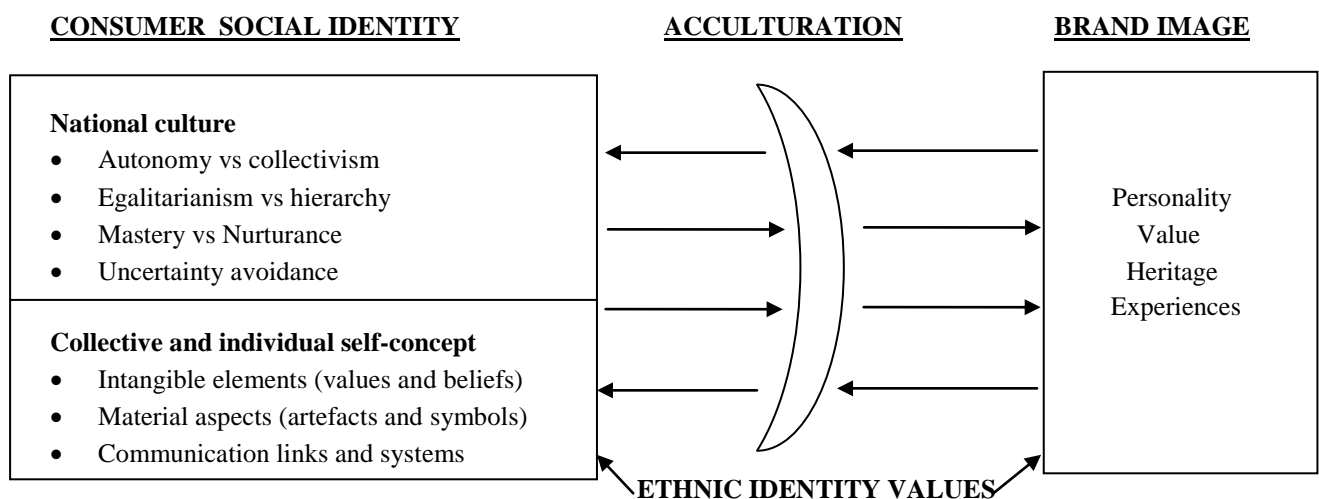
The emerging markets of Eastern Europe and Russia present a number of attractions for Western international companies. Consumers in these countries share a number of historical, language, social and cultural similarities. In the early stages of economic growth in this region, Western brands were embraced by consumers as a mean of declaring a much-desired belongingness to the modern world (De Abreu-Filho et al, 2003; Cunliffe, 1995). More recent observations of consumer attitudes in these markets suggest that most consumers want a mix of domestic and Western brands, they recognise that the West still represents quality, status, security and success, but at the same time they are keen to manifest their nations’ recent achievements and egalitarianism by becoming more individuality-orientated in developing their brand perceptions (Lewis, 2005). The success of domestic brands with a Western image (like Wimm-Bill-Dann dairy and drinks in Russia) as well as the popularity of local brands built by multinational companies (Omnia coffee introduced by Douwe Egberts in Hungary) are examples of consumers in Eastern Europe taking a step beyond evaluating brands based on their “Westernness” or “non-Westernness” and responding to other intangible brand components. However, Friedman (in Lewis, 2005) notes that “*Western ideas and products have been very widely and unconsciously adopted by young people in over the last decade and defined the consumer culture for the population as a whole*”. This observation can be explained by the process of acculturation which is discussed in the section below.

The Acculturation “lens”

Acculturation has been defined as a “*phenomenon of the value, attitudinal and behavioural changes of individuals who come into contact with another culture*” (Cheung-Blunden and Juang, 2008 p.21). Previous research conceptualised acculturation theory predominantly in the immigrant settings where an individual migrates to another culture. Two existing conceptual frameworks have developed to model the phenomenon; the unidimensional or assimilation model and the bidimensional model. Assimilation model speculates that once the individual acquires a host culture’s traits and values, he/she correspondingly loses their original (or home) cultural identity. On the contrary, the bidimensional model (Berry, 1997; Laroche et al., 1997; Mendoza, 1989; Phinney, 1990) allows individuals to identify with more than one culture (Cleveland and Laroche, 2007). Subsequently, consumer acculturation is a subset of acculturation (Penaloza, 1989), and focuses on how individuals derive knowledge and behaviours that are pursued by different consumer cultures (Cleveland and Laroche, 2007).

This research attempts to analyse the potential occurrence and mediating effects of acculturation phenomenon within groups of consumers residing in their home countries. Further advancement of international markets and trade require the existing theory to be extended, as consumers across the globe are being constantly exposed to several cultures other than their local culture through global media, increasing travel and international marketing and branding. Cleveland and Laroche (2007) developed an Acculturation to the Global Consumer Culture (AGCC) scale, positing the linking and measuring of both global (AGCC) and local (Ethnic Identification) cultural influences on consumption behaviours. Although innovative and well-structured, this framework has not been validated across cultures and therefore, has not been proven reliable; this is needed to enable application to the multi-cultural contamination of a local culture through internationalisation of markets and societies. The generic hypothesis is that consumers evaluate whether a brands’ image is a reflection of their own social identity, and acculturation serves as a mediating influence on both brand image and social identity perceptions projected by consumers, as both these constructs are co-related. Changes in one system of elements may initiate changes in the other and vice versa. It is important to analyse, from a strategic point of view, the nature of brand image/social identity congruence and at what social level (national, multi-national or in-group) cultural variances occur and become significant enough to moderate consumers’ self and brand image perceptions. Figure 1 details the conceptual models proposed.

Figure 1. Proposed Conceptual Research Model



Conclusions

Cultures transform global meanings into unique local meanings; accordingly, in each country there are differences in the meaning invested in brands, and it is likely that consumers consequently hold different brand beliefs (Belk, 1998). As emerging markets evolve from lower to higher socio-economic levels, several factors influence the relative importance of brands for consumers in expressing their individual, social and national identity. Companies willing to compete effectively in these markets must possess a thorough understanding of consumer behavioural characteristics and their influence on brand perceptions in these markets. Incomplete or inadequate assessment of consumer behaviour specifics in increasingly strategically attractive markets of Eastern Europe can lead to serious brand image dysfunctionalities.

This research contributes to the consumer behaviour and branding theories by introducing a structured and consistent approach to identifying and measuring the influence of cultural variances on consumers' social identity expressed through the brands they consume. Simultaneously, the proposed model incorporates constructs representing the influence of 'imported' cultures on social, ethnic identification and consumption behaviour. The articulated paradigm of social/cultural values and consumer-brand relationships' transformation through the acculturation 'lens' will provide valuable insights for international marketers and add to the knowledge of explicit branding strategies for Eastern Europe.

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